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## FACED WITH THE CONFLICT IN THE NORTH, WHAT CAN MOZAMBIQUE LEARN FROM ITS CIVIL WAR (1976 – 1992)? AN ANALYSIS OF THE DYNAMICS OF THE INSURGENCY IN CABO DELGADO

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The history of Mozambique over the last fifty years has been marked by cycles of armed violence, opposing both the colonial and the post-colonial state. In fact, from the anti-colonial war waged by the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo), through the civil war, which pitted the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) against the Frelimo government, to the post-electoral politico-military crises, armed violence has been present in the state building process in Mozambique.

In early October 2017, another violent opposition to the state began in Cabo Delgado province. Initially regarded as a form of banditry that merely disturbed public order, the phenomenon rapidly took on alarming proportions. The attacks began to multiply. In December 2017, the Mozambican police, at the highest level, was in the area and visited the districts of Mocímboa da Praia and Palma. At the rally he held in the Mocímboa da Praia district capital, the General Commander of the Police issued the attackers with an ultimatum, giving them seven days to turn themselves in to the authorities (O País, 2017). However, the attacks spread to other districts in the northern part of Cabo Delgado. Between late March and mid-April 2020, the armed violence reached levels never seen previously with the assault on and temporary occupation of four towns in the districts of Mocímboa da Praia, Quissanga, Muí-dumbe and Ibo. What factors lie at the origin of the advance of the insurgency on the ground? What type of relationship is developing between the insurgents and the local population? Is there any potential for the insurgency to spread southwards, towards the coastal area of Nampula? How has the state been responding to the insurgency? These questions are an important part of the research programme entitled “State, violence and development challenges in northern Mozambique”, under way at IESE since August 2019.

Making use of the material produced under the above-mentioned research programme, this paper analyses the dynamics of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado and asks what Mozambique can learn from its cycles of armed violence, particularly the civil war, to face the current conflict in the north of the country. We argue that, despite the differences between the civil war and the insurgency in Cabo Delgado, for example, regar-

ding the actors and the message, there are similar aspects from the point of view of the dynamics of the conflict and the structuring of the state’s response. These differences and similarities lead us to reflect on the possible lessons that Mozambique could draw from the experience of its civil war (1976 – 1992), in searching for answers to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado.

### The insurgency in Cabo Delgado: a different conflict with similar dynamics

Despite the controversy over the causes and motivations of the armed conflict which has ravaged Cabo Delgado since early October 2017, the little research that exists shows that the group at the origin of the first attack on Mocímboa da Praia is linked to a religious sect, known locally by the name Al-Shabaab, whose presence in some districts of Cabo Delgado was felt as from the start of the decade, particularly in Balama, Chiúre, Montepuez, Macomia and Mocímboa da Praia (Morier-Genoud, 2019; Habibe, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019). At the start, it was a merely religious group which demanded the practice of a radical Islam, the installation of Sharia law, and opposed all forms of collaboration with the state. But Al-Shabaab came to include military cells, and hardened its discourse as from late 2015, adopting armed action in 2017. Thus there began a new cycle of armed violence in Mozambique, articulated around a religious discourse, exploiting and mobilizing the various tensions existing locally – social, political and economic. While, on the one hand, this new cycle of armed violence, as we shall see below, has elements similar to the cycles of the past, on the other hand, it is different, particularly when compared with the civil war (1976-1992).

### The civil war (1976 – 1992) and the insurgency in Cabo Delgado: the differences that count

The end of the anticolonial war, in 1974, did not necessarily mean the end of armed violence in Mozambique. Indeed, having achieved independence in an extremely tense regional context, characterised by the existence of white minority racist regimes in Rhodesia and in South Africa, Mozambique became the victim of foreign aggression as from 1976, which was later transformed into a civil war waged by Renamo (Geffray, 1990; Cahen, 2002; Hall & Young, 1997; Morier-

Genoud, Cahen & Rosario, 2018). The civil war which devastated Mozambique for sixteen years was different from the insurgency under way in Cabo Delgado in many aspects. For our purpose in this paper, we would like to mention two major differences. The first concerns the actors. Unlike the civil war, in which there was the involvement (direct/indirect) of foreign state actors, in the context of the dynamics of the cold war and the regional correlation of forces, and a domestic group without religious pretensions; in Cabo Delgado, at least at the start, there was no sign of the involvement of foreign state actors and the domestic group, which enshrines the armed violence, with clearly religious pretensions, has local origins, albeit with contacts outside of Mozambique, and the participation of foreign radicals who set themselves up locally through marriage alliances (Habibe, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019). Hence one cannot regard Al-Shabaab in Cabo Delgado as a mere foreign creation, as the official discourse attempted to persuade people to believe about Renamo, in the context of the civil war. The second difference between the civil war and the insurgency in Cabo Delgado concerns the message of the groups behind the violent opposition to the state. In fact, while during the civil war, the domestic group (Renamo) did not call into question the foundations of the Mozambican state (for example, the lay nature of the state), in Cabo Delgado, Al-Shabaab, right from the start, although not in a very elaborate way, has called for the installation of a state with religious foundations, namely Sharia law (Morier-Genoud, 2019; Habibe, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019). But while it is true that the comparison between the civil war and the insurgency in Cabo Delgado brings important differences to light, it is no less true that there are similarities from the viewpoint of the development dynamics of the armed violence itself.

### The insurgency in Cabo Delgado: another conflict, similar dynamics

Since the outbreak of armed conflict on 5 October 2017, an official discourse has been built and consolidated according to which the insurgency in Cabo Delgado “has no face and no message”. Frequently repeated, almost mechanically, by the mass media, this discourse made a blank slate of the “archaeology”<sup>1</sup> and the ethnography of the insurgency – that is, of the

<sup>1</sup>We take the expression “archaeology” from Eric Morier-Genoud and Justo Nauva, in their paper entitled “Archaeology of the insurrection: the religious dynamic”, in the international conference on “Islamist insurgencies in Africa: history, dynamics and comparative elements”, organised by IESE, in Maputo, on 5-6 December 2019.

evidence on the ground. In fact, in addition to the countless denunciations made by the local Muslim leaders to the government authorities about the existence of youths with radical tendencies in the local mosques, in January 2018, there circulated the first video showing six youths, brandishing AK-47 assault rifles, their faces half-covered who, referring to the attack against Mocimboa da Praia, called on Mozambicans to join the group to struggle against Satan who, in their understanding was calling into question the teachings of Allah. In June 2019, the first claims from Islamic state started to appear concerning the authorship of the attacks. Although these claims had no solid evidence, they were increasing in consistency and frequency.

When looking at the development of the armed violence in Cabo Delgado, one notes that some of the dynamics, when compared with those that occurred during the civil war, are not completely new. For our purpose in this paper we would like to mention at least two aspects, namely the advance of the insurgency, and how the response of the state is structured.

#### How can the advance of the insurgency be explained?

What the Mozambican authorities initially considered a mere act of banditry was transformed, in a few months, into a complex armed conflict, with the deaths of many defenceless civilians, the destruction of public infrastructures and houses, and the consequent humanitarian crisis of displaced people. Regardless of the debate on the causes/motivations of the conflict, the evidence on the ground shows that the advance of the insurgency is fed by multiple cleavages, namely ethnic, historical, social and political. In this regard, in his work on the electoral geography and insurgency in Cabo Delgado, under the IESE research programme mentioned above, Brito (2020) shows the link between the development of the insurgency and the local cleavages. Based on an analysis of the dynamic of the vote in the districts of Cabo Delgado, since the first multi-party elections in 1994, Brito stresses that “the insurgency seems to be developing in areas and among population groups marginalised by the state, mobilising in particular young people in rupture with the state, but also “traditional” society, in so far as they adopt a fundamentalist practice of Islam” (Brito, 2020: 6). The literature on the civil war in Mozambique shows how Renamo mobilized local cleavages in its favour (Geffray, 1990; Cahen, 2002; Morier-Genoud, Cahen & Rosario, 2018). Referring to the conflict in Cabo Delgado, Brito stresses that “in this aspect, it seems we are facing the same kind of dynamic which characterised the war waged by Renamo: the arrival of an armed group, bearing a discourse of opposition to the established order, acts to accelerate social discontent and radicalises socio-political cleavages, some of them historical, which already existed locally” (Brito, 2020: 6). This allowed Al-Shabaab to find a certain support from more marginalised sectors, particularly young people who, in some cases, sold what little they had and went to join the group (Habibe, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019). Thanks to this support, Al-Shabaab was able to set up an efficient network of logistical and information gathering support, formed by young people divided into small

groups inserted into the communities, and locally known as “the eyes of the bush”. According to our interviews, in addition to logistical support, these youths undertake surveillance and keep the insurgents informed about the movements of the Defence and Security Forces (FDS) in the area, a fact which plays an important role in launching the group’s military operations and in its advance on the ground. Hence, just as happened with Renamo during the civil war, it may be said that Al-Shabaab has managed, to some extent, to penetrate into the social fabric of the local communities, which has allowed the group greater mobility on the ground and efficiency in military operations. The second aspect which seems to us relevant to mention, which refers us to the similarities with the dynamics of the civil war, is the structuring of the state’s response.

#### The State’s response

Just as happened in the initial phase of the civil war, the evidence on the ground shows that the Mozambican state underestimated the real scale of the threat which the Cabo Delgado phenomenon represented. Indeed, the devaluing by the government authorities of the denunciations made by the local Muslim religious leaderships well before the first attack on Mocimboa da Praia (Nhamossa, 2020; Habibe, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019; Chichava, 2020), the surreal ultimatum given by the Mozambican police to the insurgents to hand over their weapons in the space of a week (O Pais, 2017), the systematic insistence in the discourse according to which the insurgency in Cabo Delgado “has no face and no message”, when the reality on the ground indicated the existence of radicalized youths in the group of attackers, suggest that the government authorities regarded the attacks as simple banditry. In our understanding, this helped ensure that the state’s response was not in line with the demands of the real threat of the phenomenon of radicalization. Instead, it often prioritised the thesis of a foreign conspiracy, to the detriment of the domestic factors which are feeding the insurgency. Furthermore, when the Mozambican state decided publicly to take a position on the conflict in Cabo Delgado, through the National Defence and Security Council (CNDS), it attributed authorship of the attacks to the Islamic State, and because of this it considered that the country was facing “a foreign aggression” (Notícias, 2020). In this regard, there is a striking similarity with what happened in the civil war, in that, for a long time, Renamo was seen as a mere creation of the racist white minority regimes in the region (Rhodesia, and later South Africa) with the sole aim of destabilising the Mozambican state. Hence the war was nothing more than “a foreign aggression”. However, the thesis of “foreign aggression”, although it was true, hid an entire internal dynamic marked by social, political and economic cleavages, which transformed the “foreign aggression” into a large scale domestic conflict with dramatic consequences. As for Cabo Delgado, it would be important for Mozambique to learn from this experience of civil war.

While it is true that recently the claim by Islamic State of responsibility for the attacks shows outside factors involved in the conflict, it is also no less true that evi-

dence on the ground shows that the development of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado has been nourished considerably by internal factors, crystallised in multiple local cleavages. To deny this would be dangerous for the state’s response to this conflict. Indeed, it would be a mistake to think that Al-Shabaab in Cabo Delgado are a creation of Islamic state. The archaeology and the ethnography of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado, mentioned above, suggest that the origins of the group are local, although one can speak of foreign elements within it (Morier-Genoud, 2019; Habibe, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019). When we look at the literature on violent jihadist movements in Africa, and their relationships with global terrorism, it can be concluded that the case of Al-Shabaab in Cabo Delgado is not an exception (Hansen, 2018; Oyewole, 2015; Forest & Giroux, 2011). These are groups that result from local dynamics and, at a certain time, seek a connection with global terrorism by promising loyalty. However, as Hansen (2018) stresses, in this connection sight should not be lost of the relevance of the local dimension of these groups, in that it is the multiple local cleavages that allow insurgencies to develop. Hence it is important that the response of the Mozambican state to the conflict in Cabo Delgado should not be structured solely in terms of the external dimension, namely the “foreign aggression” waged by Islamic State. The state’s response should address and give due stress to the internal factors behind the armed violence, crystallised in the multiple ethnic, social and economic tensions that exist locally, in order to ensure not only that the conflict does not intensify, but also that it does not eventually spread to other zones in northern Mozambique.

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